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ABSTRACT

To ascertain why some Mexican Americans achieve despite the record that less than 60% of all Hispanics complete high school and earn only 2% of all bachelor's and 1% of all doctoral degrees, retrospective interviews provided data on 10 dimensions of background characteristics of 45 Chicano "invulnerables." One-third were females; all were 40 years old or less, possessed a J.D., M.D., or Ph.D. from a recognized university, and came from families in which neither parent had completed high school or held a job higher than skilled laborer. Salient findings indicated: all subjects translated parental regard for the work ethic to their school work; half viewed their mothers as the dominant, supportive figure in the home; almost two-thirds attended highly integrated (Anglo) schools, competing successfully against students representing the dominant society; by high school, 82% were considered "college material"; most came from Chicano communities acknowledged as "better than other Chicano neighborhoods"; most felt persistence first, then hard work and ability, were most important to their academic success; all were bicultural, coming from Spanish-speaking homes with strong Mexican cultural ties, but able to adapt to the dominant culture; and many were influenced by the personal attention of a role model or mentor. (NEC)

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Patricia Gándara

December 1980

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The Rand Corporation
Santa Monica, California 90406

# CHICANO SCHOLARS: AGAINST ALL ODDS

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A paper presented at the annual meeting
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CHICANO SCHOLARS: AGAINST ALL ODDS

Hispanics have an astoundingly dismal record of educational attainment. Although recent statistics show that about 21 percent of Hispanic high school graduates go on to college, a look behind those statistics reveals a rather depressing picture. Between 40 and 50 percent of Hispanics drop out of school before graduation. For Chicanos we believe the figure is closest to 50 percent. Of those who do attend college, about two-thirds attend two-year institutions where attrition rates are very high. And of the total number of Hispanics who attend college, about half drop out before completing their degrees. The net result is that about two percent of all bachelor's degrees conferred go to Hispanics, and Chicanos, of course, are a fraction of that number. Only seven percent of that tiny fraction of degrees are earned in the biological and physical sciences. The picture gets worse as we look at doctoral degree recipients. Only slightly more than one percent of all doctoral degrees conferred go to Hispanics who are U.S. citizens. Of these, less than 15 percent are in the sciences.[1]

So what can we do to improve these figures? I'm not sure that I have any answers, but I can tell you about some of the people who form that tiny group--Chicanos who pursued advanced degrees--and some of the factors they suggested were important in achieving their goals.

The study I will be describing to you is based on an approach to the study of mental health which was developed at the University of Minnesota by Norman Garmezy and his colleagues.[2] These researchers were interested in the process whereby children who are at high risk for developing mental health problems seem to avoid that fate. They have labeled those who manage to emerge from schizophrenogenic homes without serious mental health consequences as "invulnerables."

In my own research, I have conceptualized Chicanos from low income backgrounds as a similar high risk group. We are at high risk for school failure and all the social consequences that follow. There are certain background characteristics that are well established as good predictors of school performance. Family income, parents' educational level, race and ethnicity are unquestionably powerful predictors. Low income, low level of education attainment on the part of parents, membership in a racial or ethnic minority group each contributes significantly to low achievement in school. Taken together, they substantially increase the probability that a child will not graduate from high school, let alone obtain advanced college degrees.

Yet, some do. These are the people I have called the "invulnerables." Although something can be learned from their histories, I must stress that this was not a predictive study and hence cannot provide definitive answers. It does however lead to some legitimate hypotheses and, I think, suggests some important caveats.

The method of study was the following. A retrospective interview, using an instrument which had been developed for this study, was employed to collect data on 45 male and female subjects who met the following criteria: Mexican American, 40 years of age or less, possessing a J.D., M.D., or Ph.D. from a recognized university, and coming from families in which neither parent had completed high school or held a job higher in status than skilled labor. Of the 45 subjects in the study, approximately one-third were females; approximately half were Ph.D.'s with the other half evenly divided between M.D.'s and J.D.'s. All interviews were conducted in person in California, Texas, and Washington, D.C. Data were collected on ten dimensions of background characteristics: demographic variables, religion, parental characteristics and child-rearing practices, physical environment of the home, school variables, peer relations, communities, health factors, ethnic identity and acculturation, and personal attitudes. Data were analyzed for the group as a whole, and for three different sub-groups: sex, the three academic degrees, and two levels of socioeconomic status (lower-lower and upper-lower).

Here I want to digress for just a moment to explain the two socioeconomic categories. I had thought that my subjects would all be very

similar with respect to socioeconomic background variables. You recall that all subjects came from families in which parents were "laborers" and neither had a high school education. However, in analyzing the data, it became evident that within this group there were really two very distinct subgroups: those whose parents held unskilled jobs such as farm labor and factory work, and those whose parents actually had one foot in the middle class as a result of holding skilled and semi-skilled jobs that provided a steady and reasonable standard of living. These two subgroups looked quite different on a number of dimensions. I'll discuss some of the implications of this early finding later on.

Although many interesting findings emerged, it is only possible to summarize a few of the more salient ones in the amount of time allowed.

With regard to child-rearing practices, no single characteristic was more salient to the subjects or seemingly more worthy of note than that their parents had an extremely high regard for hard work. The work ethic of the parents appeared to be translated by the subjects into their school work. Because they were basically able students, the application of hard work and the high standards for performance which were set by parents seemed to have propelled them to the top of the class. From this vantage point, and with continued encouragement from family and teachers, these subjects were able to seriously entertain notions of a college education. The importance of believing in and feeling compelled to work hard at any task is underscored by the fact that not only did subjects emphasize the hard work models of their parents, but they rated hard work and persistence in themselves as characteristics which they considered to be substantially more important than their own ability.

Another finding of particular interest was related to the important role of the mother in the lives of the subjects. Numerous studies have commented on and described the role of the Mexican or Chicana mother as a secondary one with respect to decision making in the family.[3] Albeit much admired and even revered, she is, according to the stereotype, supposed to defer to the husband or male figure in decision making and administrative functions of the family. This was not at all the

case with the mothers of these subjects. Nearly three-quarters of the mothers worked outside of the home and over two-thirds of the subjects stated that their mother had at least equal authority in their homes with regard to making important decisions. Almost half of the subjects viewed their mother as the dominant figure in the home. Across sexes, degree categories, and SES levels, mothers were more supportive of education than were fathers and were more instrumental in shaping their children's goals. Fathers appeared to be more affected by socioeconomic pressures such that lower-lower SES fathers were rated as valuing education significantly less than upper-lower SES fathers. However, across SES levels, mothers were steadfast in their support of the importance of education.

Another important influence on these subjects was school. Almost two-thirds of the sample subjects attended highly integrated (at least half Anglo) or mostly Anglo schools. This was in spite of the fact that these subjects were from lower SES backgrounds which should have had the effect of increasing racial/ethnic segregation for them. Statistics for this time period indicate that between seven and 15 percent of Mexican American students were likely to be in majority schools.[4] Forty-two percent of the subjects in this study attended majority schools.

Attempts have been made by other educational researchers to explain the positive effects of an integrated education on minority students. The theory that seems to have greatest currency was suggested by the Coleman report in the late 1960's.[5] Their explanation for the apparently higher educational aspirations of minority students attending integrated schools was that the pro-education values of the white students "rubbed off" on them. However, at least for these subjects, I think it was something else. These people already had a high value for education; what the integrated schools provided for them was the opportunity to compete against a realistic standard. Over and over I heard from subjects that they had selected out the brightest Anglo students in their classes and competed against them. Sometimes this competition lasted for years, without the other student ever being aware of it. But the fact that they were able to compete successfully

against a student who was a realistic representation of the dominant society gave them the confidence to pursue a higher education in a milieu which otherwise would have been completely foreign.

A second aspect of school--the academic records of the subjects--was an important sub-question in this study. Overall, subjects demonstrated good academic records. By high school, 82 percent of the subjects were doing well enough to be considered "college material." The females reported being high achievers, with only a few instances of academic difficulties,throughout school. However, should one have attempted to predict academic attainment in elementary school, at least one out of four of the subjects would have been an unlikely choice to go on to college, let alone a graduate education. In sum, while most of these subjects would have been viewed as likely candidates for college educations at any point in their compulsory education, almost one of five would have gone undiscovered even as late as midway through high school. This seems to be a sufficiently large margin of error to warrant a review of policies or attitudes which differentially encourage students--especially minority students--who appear to be "high potential" over those who would seem not to be.

One of the most intriguing findings has to do with communities in which the subjects lived. Comments that subjects made in describing their communities suggested that many of the subjects grew up in neighborhoods which made their own unique contribution to the educational successes of these individuals. Many people described their neighborhoods as having produced a disproportionate number of high academic achievers. When asked to explain why this might be, subjects were often somewhat vague, but described what seemed to be a community character: "gutsy" communities, or "everyone was moving out to something better." A couple of the communities were near colleges. Many were in a region of South Texas where segregation is so extreme that all-Chicano communities elect their own mayor, police chief, etc., thus providing excellent role models for youth. The thing that these neighborhoods often seemed to have in common, however, was that they were widely acknowledged as being better than other Chicano neighborhoods which may have been only a block or two away. Although the other neighborhoods were described

as being similar with respect to socioeconomic status variables, they were often characterized by delinquency and other social pathology, which was atypical of the neighborhoods in which the subjects were raised. That is, these other neighborhoods seemed to be "at risk" in contrast to the socially healthier climate of the subjects' neighborhoods. Whether the parents of the subjects consciously chose to live in certain neighborhoods--and not in others--was not always clear, but one suspects that this was often the case.

Finally, it is important to comment on the personal characteristics which the subjects felt were critically important for their academic successes. Three things were mentioned with greatest frequency: persistence, hard work, and ability, in that order. The importance of this would seem to lie in the weight given to each. Almost twice as many people nominated persistence as mentioned ability.

Studies of individuals who achieve despite factors which would have predicted that they would not, are subject to a very logical criticism: that these people are the random outliers at the far end of the ability spectrum. That is, academic achievement is a function of genetic material rather than environmental influences. To judge from the responses of my subjects, however, this was not the case. Unless we are to believe that persistence and a hard work ethic are largely genetic characteristics, it would seem that background factors must have had an important role in the development of these characteristics and on their subsequent effect on academic performance.

Although my planned presentation was to end here, I would like to follow up on the comments by Dr. Cortese, regarding the effects of acculturation. I found something interesting that I think would confirm her position. An important feature of these subjects was the fact that they were bicultural people. They came from homes that were, for the most part, Spanish-speaking and in which cultural ties to Mexico were still very strong. They had a keen sense of who they were and they felt good about that. Yet they were able to adapt to the dominant culture. This ability to feel comfortable in both cultures became an important asset in promoting themselves and their careers. And I have no doubt that their integrated educations contributed to this cultural flexibility.

Second, I want to comment on the importance of role models and mentors for these subjects. While the decision to go to college at all was apparently the result of a number of background factors, the pursuit of a graduate education often depended on someone taking a personal interest in the subject and filling the role of mentor. Few of the subjects knew at the beginning of their college careers what they wanted to do when they finished college. Some knew that they wanted to continue to study, but had no idea how, or what, in particular, they would study. Most had never envisioned a J.D., M.D., or Ph.D. degree. The fact that they now hold these degrees can be, in many cases, directly attributed to a single person who took a special interest and opened important doors for the subject. And, I think that's where you come in. Strong mothers, integrated schools, and healthy communities may have profound effects on the educational attainment of some Chicano students. But people like yourselves who come into contact with these students can provide the necessary impetus for a student to reach for higher goals than he or she had ever envisioned.

## FOOTNOTES

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3. See, for example Baca Zinn, M., "Employment and Education of Mexican-American Women: The Interplay of Modernity and Ethnicity in Eight Families," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1, February 1980. Murillo, N. The Mexican-American Family, in N. Wagner & J. J. Haug, *Chicanos: Social and Psychological Perspectives*, Saint Louis, Missouri: The C.V. Mosby Company, 1971.

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